

chapter 4

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Get Out the Trial Balloons

Did you wake up this morning thinking “public participation”? If not, your plan may already be in trouble. And even if you did wake up thinking “public participation,” there never seems to be a completely adequate way to do it—other than simply to do it. Here are five guidelines that might help:

- Get the right people involved in the planning
- Don’t think of public participation as a one-time task, such as a public workshop or set of public hearings, but as a continuous process
- Don’t discuss vision, goals, or solutions until there is wide agreement on the problems
- But do get to vision, goals and solutions soon after
- Involve the public in hands-on work

GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE INVOLVED

If your transportation plan is part of a larger Comprehensive Plan, the work probably is being directed by an advisory committee of citizens – a Comprehensive Plan Committee, a committee of the Planning Board, or similar group. (The make-up of a Comprehensive Plan Committee is discussed in detail in [Comprehensive Planning: A Manual for Maine Communities](#).) If so, you may want to consider appointing a subcommittee that brings representatives of several parties of transportation interest into the process, including:

- Transportation-dependent businesses (such as distributors and trucking concerns or those that use air/sea ports and rail)
- Businesses located both in downtowns and along developing corridors
- Providers and users of transit services
- Social service agencies whose clients depend on those services
- Residents of neighborhoods concerned with traffic issues

If your plan will stand alone, the Town should appoint a committee that includes others who are typically part of a Comprehensive Plan Committee, such as:

- Representatives of the “official town family” – members of town boards and departments involved with decisions affecting land use

- Citizens with positions of leadership in sectors that represent different points of view, different parts of town, and different demographic groups (and make sure to include people who are likely to be skeptical of changes in current policies and practices)
- People recognized as “opinion leaders” – who may not hold a formal position but whose voices are respected by affected businesses, in neighborhoods, in their interest group, etc.
- Other members of the general public who have a broad view of public interest and are not aligned with any particular point of view

If your transportation plan is a corridor plan involving other communities, the legislative bodies of the communities should agree on how each community will be represented and appoint people with whom town councils and boards of selectmen can easily communicate throughout the process. (See sidebar on Gateway I.)

Gateway I Corridor Project Steering Committee

Gateway I covers 21 municipalities in a 100-mile Route 1 corridor from Brunswick to Prospect. A Memorandum of Understanding established that each of the 21 municipalities' Councils or Boards of Selectmen would appoint one voting representative plus one alternate to a Steering Committee. In addition, each municipality has the opportunity to name a Town Response Panel, from which the Steering Committee representative can obtain feedback. Finally, interested organizations were invited to register with the Steering Committee to be kept apprised of its meetings and to be invited to give input on issues of interest to them.

A CONTINUOUS PROCESS

Transportation engineers, as well as certain permit review processes (such as Environmental Impact Statements), used to follow a logical, straight-line process, with one step following another:

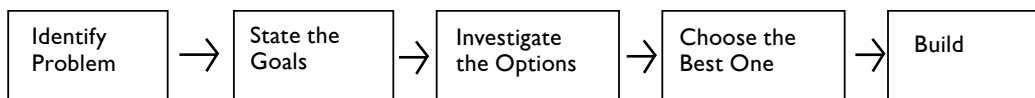
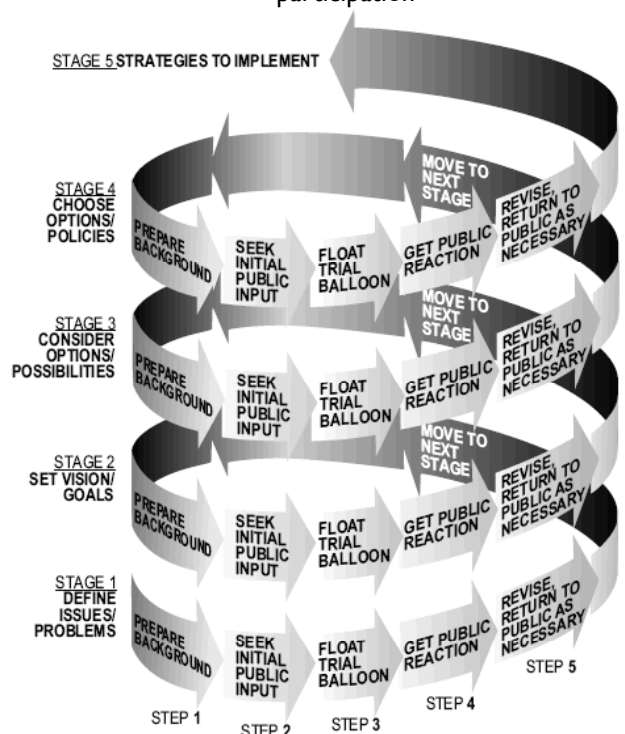


Figure 4-1.
Continuous public participation

The public was involved at different points along the way – for example, to scope out the issues and to comment on the options. But as transportation issues have become more complex and contentious, and when land use is laid on top, the decision-making process is anything but a straight line. And if the public is only involved at a few points along the way, those who feel injured by the plan will find a way to block it. The public has to be an ever-present part of the process – both as advisors guiding the planning and as interested parties reacting to ideas as they emerge, not just when the ideas are nearly cooked.

An effective process looks more like an upward spiral (Figure 4.1) – where it can feel like you are going backwards (or not making much progress) at times, but in fact you are moving constantly toward choices that are acceptable to the community. You're still going through the stages that are



part of the straight line (defining the problems, setting goals, considering options, choosing the preferred strategies). But the public – either through the citizens' committee, outreach to the wider public, or both – is involved at each stage.

At each stage, following initial public input, consider floating the planning group's thoughts as trial balloons. Think you've defined the problem (and its causes) appropriately? Float it as a trial balloon – and be prepared to reconsider if enough people with interest in the question have different ideas. Think you've set the right vision and goals? Make sure to get the public input first, then float them as a trial balloon. And so forth, right up to and including choosing the course of action and implementing it.

AGREE ON THE PROBLEMS FIRST

Sometimes the planning process tries to set a vision and related goals for the community or region at the outset. This works when the problems confronting a community are obvious and widely shared.

But many land use-transportation problems are not obvious: they are hard to define with precision; there is disagreement about their causes; and solutions tend to threaten one group or another even as they may benefit the larger community. For example, downtown traffic problems, traffic cutting or speeding through neighborhoods, establishing or expanding regional transportation facilities, and large-scale retail development along commercial strips all can be issues of contentious debate.

In these cases, reaching a vision about the future before the nature, scale, and causes of the problem are deeply understood either may be so general as to be unhelpful in setting a path toward resolution, or so specific that it polarizes people with different interests into opposing camps.

Where transportation issues are contentious, take the time to convene parties with different interests and to jointly document the nature of the problem, its scale (how big or widespread is it?), and its causes. Often, if the parties of interest can agree there is a problem and acknowledge its causes, they can begin to hammer out a vision of a different future that acknowledges the trade-offs that will be required by the different parties.

The basis for defining the problems (and opportunities) in the transportation system is a fact-gathering process – an inventory and analysis – that is a required part of a Community Transportation Plan and the topic of Chapter 5.

BUT DO GET TO VISION AND GOALS SOON THEREAFTER

A common vision that is described in terms of achievable, broad outcomes is indeed important to describe and document on paper. Getting there is the topic of Chapter 6.

INVOLVE THE PUBLIC IN HANDS-ON WORK

A good strategy for public participation uses multiple tools. The basics include a representative steering or advisory committee, public workshops and charrettes, and website feedback and other outreach. In addition, there are several especially good opportunities to involve interested persons in hands-on work. These include the use of a “neighborhood audit,” with the help of local volunteers, described in Chapter 5; and visual preference photography, described in Chapter 6. In some cases, deep public involvement may be necessary. For example, some transportation planners working on traffic calming strategies in neighborhoods not only involve a neighborhood planning committee but also put selected strategies to an informal vote of neighborhood residents, giving them veto authority if a majority and sometimes a super-majority do not approve the proposal.

The public participation process is described in more detail in [Comprehensive Planning: A Manual for Maine Communities](#). Now, we will get right to the business of taking stock and identifying issues.